

Emma Heffernan, John McHale, and Niamh Moore-Cherry (eds), *Debating austerity in Ireland: crisis, experience and recovery*. Royal Irish Academy: Dublin, 2017, 339 pp. ISBN: 978-1-908997-68-5, €20 (pbk)

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This edition achieves what it set out to do. There is a great deal of plurality in the debate, with diverse views and a good interplay between 16, high-quality, concise and short contributions and a clear introduction and conclusion. Divided into three parts, the first four articles (Part 1) review austerity as a concept and a practice, the next eight articles (Part 2) focus on the experience of austerity from a wide range of experiences, including both quantitative and qualitative analysis, while Part 3 has three articles looking ‘beyond austerity from crisis to recovery’. There is a welcome gender balance amongst authors, although it is striking how all the women (often as co-authors) speak to the experience of austerity (Part 2), with no woman in Parts 1 or 3. While the interdisciplinary approach is a clear strength, there are notable gaps, including political science and a more explicit feminist account of the crisis.

A key reflection across the chapters was whether there were alternatives not only to austerity but also to the timing, scale and type of fiscal consolidation packages we have seen in Ireland. The editors conclude the jury is out about whether there were alternatives to austerity, but articles by Wren and Hardiman et al. are clear that it was dominant elites in an unbalanced European power regime who ruled out any such alternatives. Much of the debate reflects on the remaining domestic policy choices. It is clear many authors are unequivocal that poor and unnecessary choices made life harder than it needed to be for many people. Most of the chapters in Part 2 evidence how austerity did indeed hit vulnerable populations. The editors are unambiguous about increased hardship and new axes of division and vulnerability including sociospatial inequalities. Generational and gendered impacts (particularly in housing and homelessness, child poverty, care and public services and violence and sexual assault services and consumer patterns) are drawn out well in Heffernan’s, Gilmartin’s, Lyon’s and Hardiman et al.’s chapters, and the two qualitative articles are particularly memorable. The 2017 increase in the number of families homeless in Ireland gives a clear illustration of who is vulnerable. Two-thirds experiencing family homelessness are under 35, two-thirds are female-headed lone parent families, while 40% are migrants (split evenly between EU/non-EU), with a disproportionate number of Traveller families. Indeed, a review of lone parents’ cuts published on the eve of Budget 2018 confirms that austerity cuts directly increased poverty for lone parents.

While family homelessness marks a change in Ireland’s social reality, Gilmartin’s description of migration describes both continuities and changes. Continuity characterises other policies. Ó Riain’s chapter stresses how the cognitive lock on Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and low tax model remain similar to pre-crisis days, while Lyons’s chapter on housing describes a long continuous process of privatisation of social housing. Indeed, as Allen’s chapter argues, much of the

wider project to which austerity belongs starts before the crisis raising the issue of timing, or where and when to start the story of austerity. Other chapters raise questions about when the story ends: the cumulative impacts on vulnerable children evidenced by Watson et al. will persist into the next generation and the downward social mobility evidenced by Whelan and Nolan needs to be tracked across a long chronological span.

Taxation is a key theme in the book raising issues about choices, continuity, state capacity and institutional reform. Chapters by McHale, Ó Riain and Healy prompt questions about fiscal capacity, fiscal sustainability and tax justice, respectively, while Coffey argues for a move away from GDP-based measurements to GNP or hybrid measurements that he calculates demonstrate greater fiscal capacity in terms of revenue. Healy disputes this and, like others elsewhere (including the Nevin Economic Research Institute), demonstrates room to manoeuvre in tax choices. The Budget 2018 taxation debate illustrates how little learning percolates through to the more short-sighted political class, a key concern and cause of pessimism for Watson et al.

This raises the question of state capacity and what is required in terms of fiscal, political, public and other institutional reform. Ó Riain points to some maintenance of positive aspects of developmental state capacity, while Heffernan describes a state that is less enabling and more controlling of civil society. My own research suggests a more coercive welfare state. McHale's focus is on European and domestic reforms to the budgetary framework to enhance Ireland's capacity to avoid future crisis. The Programme for Government signals two more reforms, a parliamentary budget office and mechanisms to effectively proof taxation and expenditure. Both are crucial to make more explicit, and hold actors accountable for, political choices made.

Various chapters record loss of trust (Heffernan) and social capital (Hourigan), yet it is not yet clear how shifting political cleavages might settle. Hourigan is relatively optimistic about the greater political visibility and inter-organisational co-operation in the left political spectrum. However, the left remains challenged to flesh out political and economic alternatives such as Part 3 of the book is attempting to do. Ó Riain makes an important observation when building on Nordic evidence; he shows that higher levels of social spending are not only consistent with balanced budgets but are also an underpinning feature of such budgets.

Some of the editorial comment implies a level of discomfort and frustration with ideological debate with calls for evidence-informed debate, while some chapters (Wren-Lewis, Allen, Mercille, and Murphy) insist on making ideology, power and framing more visible in the story of austerity. The editors are rightly reluctant to force conclusions from such a wide-ranging selection of disciplines and positions. Nonetheless, they do end the book by advocating that 'if a progressive form of politics is to emerge', academics need to challenge public discourse and power dynamics that blame the state and public sector while asserting the market. I read this as a welcome call for academics, regardless of their discipline, to

engage in forms of public sociology. This book, which both the editors and the Royal Irish Academy have been mindful to make both accessible and affordable, is a welcome contribution to public discourse. It is our collective challenge to debate its contents within and beyond the academy.